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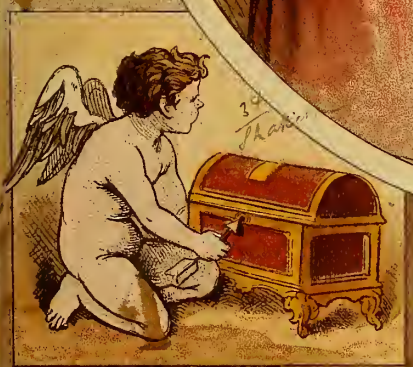
THE MERCHANT OF VENICE



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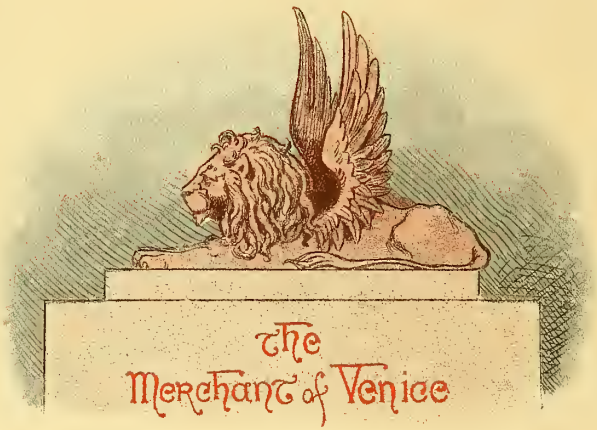

The Merchant of Venice

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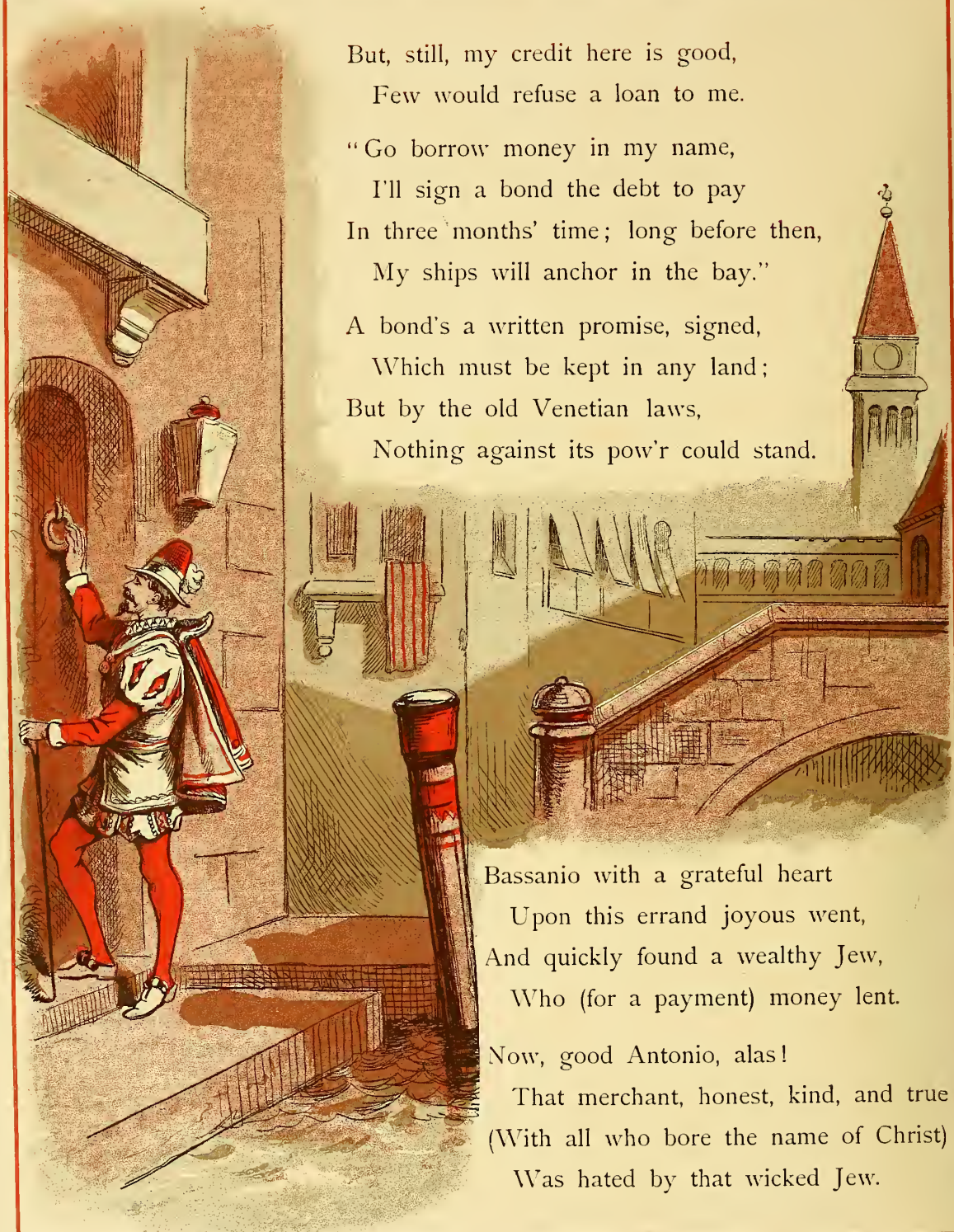
THE MERCHANT of VENICE

UP St. Mark's Place with stately step,
A merchant of fair Venice walked;
A youthful noble at his side,
With eager gesture to him talked.

And thus he said: "In Belmont dwells
A lady, fair, and rich, and wise,
By many princely suitors sought—
I once found favor in her eyes.

And if I only had the means,
To hold with them a rival's place,
I think, Antonio, I could win,
That fair and wealthy lady's grace.

Antonio smiled, and said, "Dear friend,
My fortunes all are on the sea;



But, still, my credit here is good,
Few would refuse a loan to me.

"Go borrow money in my name,
I'll sign a bond the debt to pay
In three months' time; long before then,
My ships will anchor in the bay."

A bond's a written promise, signed,
Which must be kept in any land;
But by the old Venetian laws,
Nothing against its pow'r could stand.

Bassanio with a grateful heart
Upon this errand joyous went,
And quickly found a wealthy Jew,
Who (for a payment) money lent.

Now, good Antonio, alas!
That merchant, honest, kind, and true
(With all who bore the name of Christ)
Was hated by that wicked Jew.

To do Antonio injury,
Old Shylock had been waiting long;
And now—at last—he saw a chance
To do the "royal merchant" wrong

So when Antonio appeared,
He said, "the money he would lend,
If a strange bond—proposed in jest—
Were first signed by Bassanio's friend."

The bond which he proposed was this:
Antonio should the Jew repay
Whatever sum of gold he lent,
At noon, upon a certain day.

But if the merchant chanced to fail,
In due fulfilment of his part,
Shylock should cut a pound of flesh
From near the good Antonio's heart.

Shylock this dreadful bond had framed
To gratify his deadly hate,
Hoping that change or chance might make,
The merchant's payment come too late.

Bassanio would not have it signed;
But good Antonio, for his sake,
Sure that his ships would soon be home,
Did not object the risk to take.

To Belmont with a gallant train,
Bassanio, at once he sent
A handsome wooer; full of hope,
The young Venetian noble went.

In Portia's eyes his welcome shone,
But, oh! too soon her lover found,
That, by her dear, dead father's will,
The maiden's wedded fate was bound.

Three caskets the old Lord had left,—
One gold, one silver, one dull lead,—
And one of these the man must choose
Who would the orphan heiress wed.

And if within the one he choose,
He found fair Portia's likeness laid,
She was his wife, and his her wealth, —
Won by the choice which he had made.

Bassanio, with eager love,
At once would seek to try his fate,
Though Portia (dreading he might lose)
Would fain awhile have had him wait.

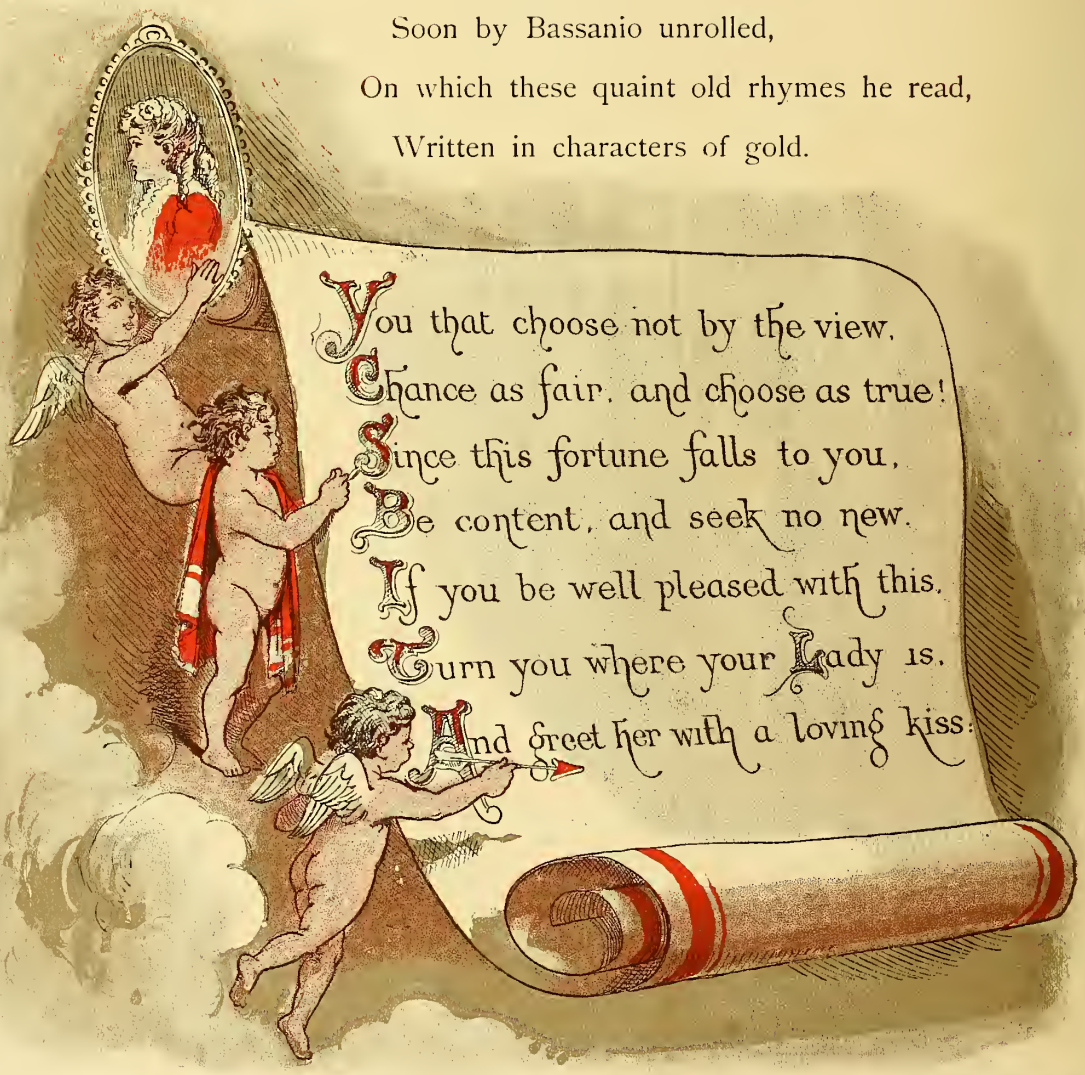
She led him to the painted hall,
Where the three fatal caskets stood,
And hoped that fortune would be kind,
To one who was so brave and good.

Awhile in silent thought he stood, —
Then softly murmured, "Men have shed,
Much blood for silver and for gold! —
I choose the dull but honest lead!"

Portia looked on with silent joy —
She had seen other suitors choose;
And knew, if gold should dazzle him,
Her handsome lover she would loose.

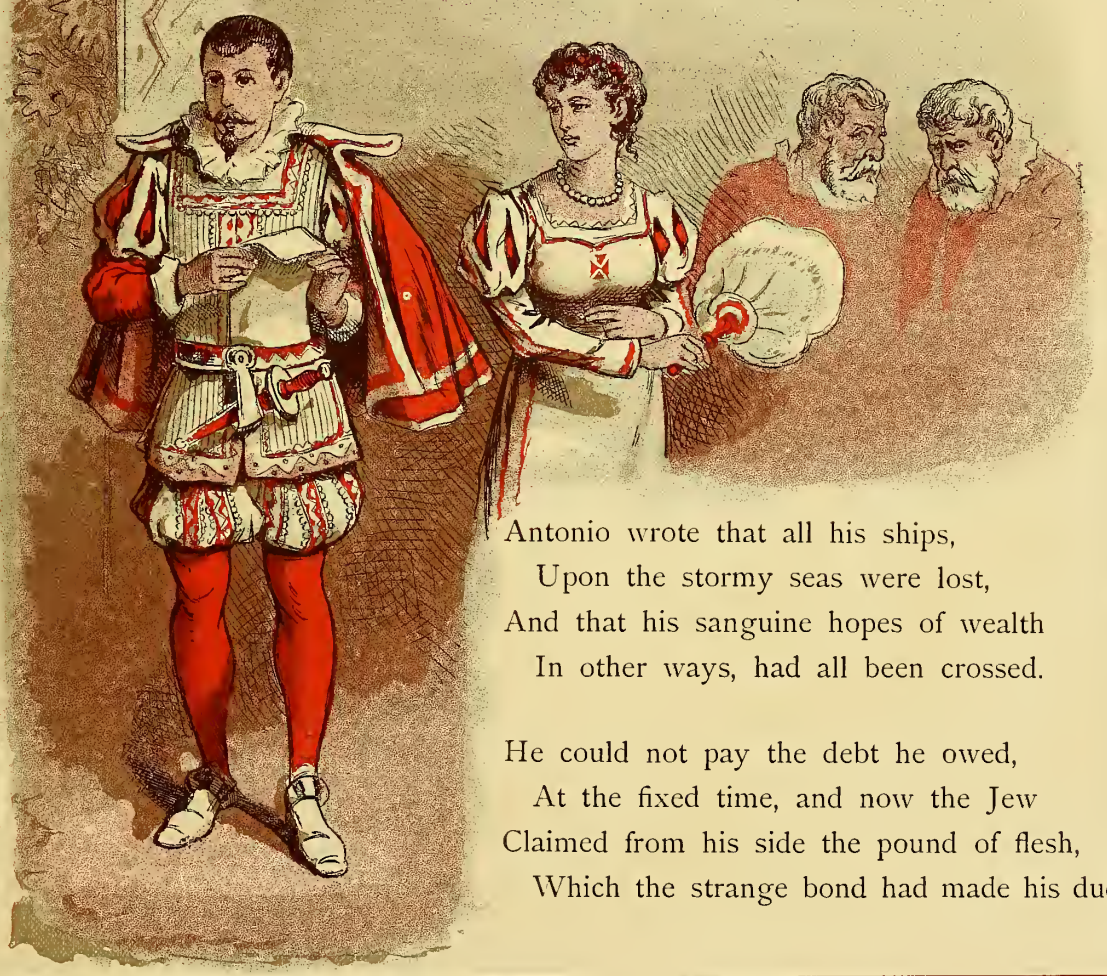
But he has won! within the box
Fair Portia's pictured image lies;
He turns, and reads the maiden's joy
In her glad smile and beaming eyes.

And with the picture was a scroll,
Soon by Bassanio unrolled,
On which these quaint old rhymes he read,
Written in characters of gold.


You that choose not by the view,
Chance as fair, and choose as true!
Since this fortune falls to you,
Be content, and seek no new.
If you be well pleased with this,
Turn you where your Lady is,
And greet her with a loving kiss.

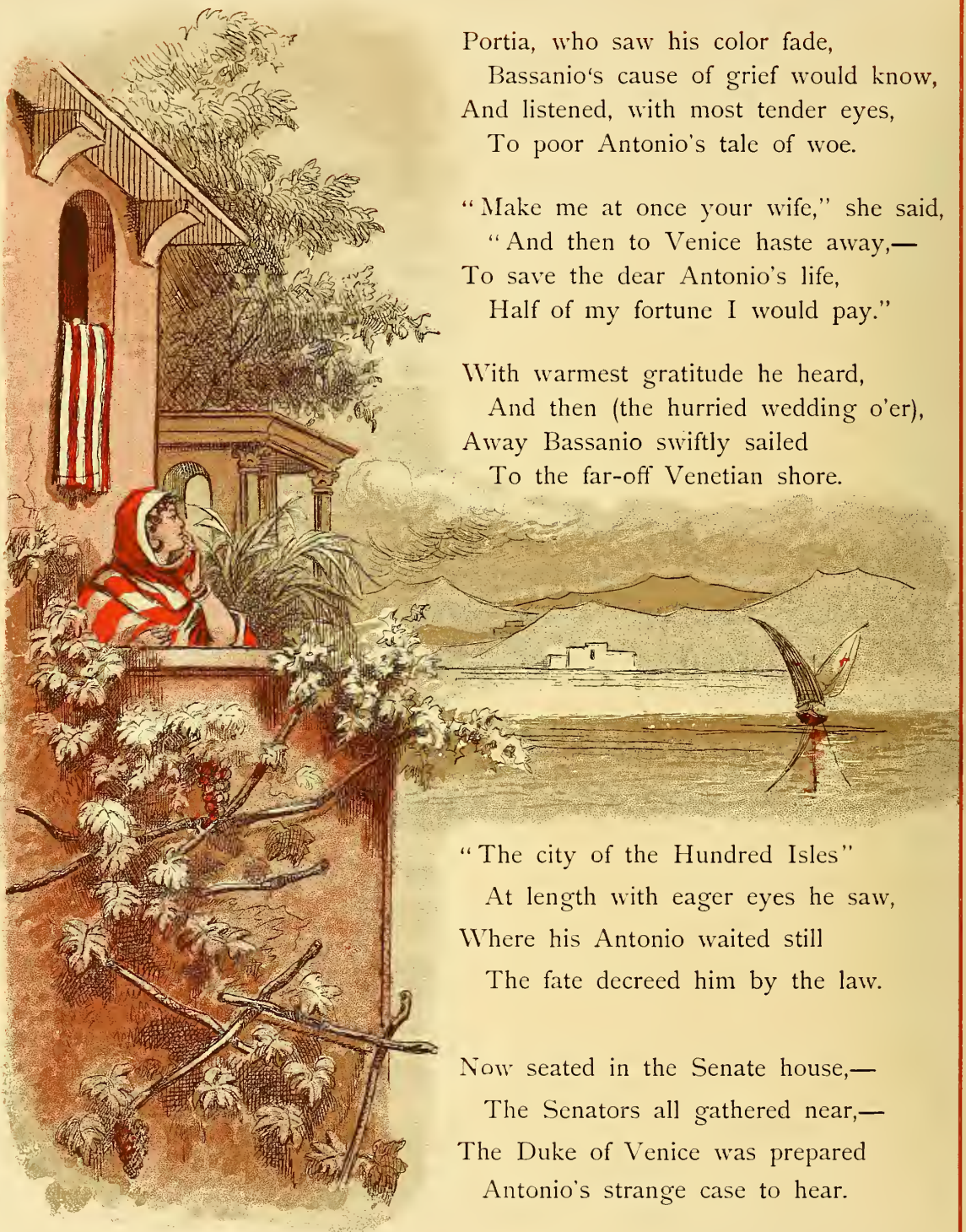
The happy kiss is scarcely given,
Before within the hall appear
An anxious group, who bring from Venice
Sad tidings to Bassanio's ear.

A letter from Antonio
They gave his friend, with mournful air,
And, as Bassanio read, his face
Grew pale with horror and despair.



Antonio wrote that all his ships,
Upon the stormy seas were lost,
And that his sanguine hopes of wealth
In other ways, had all been crossed.

He could not pay the debt he owed,
At the fixed time, and now the Jew
Claimed from his side the pound of flesh,
Which the strange bond had made his due.



Portia, who saw his color fade,
Bassanio's cause of grief would know,
And listened, with most tender eyes,
To poor Antonio's tale of woe.

"Make me at once your wife," she said,
"And then to Venice haste away,—
To save the dear Antonio's life,
Half of my fortune I would pay."

With warmest gratitude he heard,
And then (the hurried wedding o'er),
Away Bassanio swiftly sailed
To the far-off Venetian shore.

"The city of the Hundred Isles"
At length with eager eyes he saw,
Where his Antonio waited still
The fate decreed him by the law.

Now seated in the Senate house,—
The Senators all gathered near,—
The Duke of Venice was prepared
Antonio's strange case to hear.

On one side the poor merchant stood,
Patient and calm, glad that his friend,
Bassanio (for whom he died),
Would be beside him to the end.

The Duke had reason'd with the Jew,
But threats and pleadings had been vain,
Nothing his settled purpose moved,
Nor could his cruelty restrain.

And now with wolfish look of hate,
Before the Duke they see him stand:
A grey old man, in Jewish dress,
Grasping a sharp knife in his hand.

Once more the Duke with gentle words
Told him that men could not believe
That he would dare do such a deed,
And bade him now their fears relieve.

Then came Bassanio with a bag,
And offer'd to the savage Jew
A treble payment of the debt,
For which the penalty was due.

But gold and reasoning were vain,
"I'll have my bond!" he fiercely cried,
"My bond, and nothing but my bond,—
A pound of flesh cut from his side."

"I claim my bond! or deem the law
Is pow'rless in this Christian state."
The Duke replies, "Hear, first, the judge
Whose coming hither we await."

Just then a letter to the Duke
Is brought — the learnèd judge is ill,
But he has sent to fill his place
A lawyer of the highest skill.

"Admit the Judge," the Duke commands;
A graceful youth at once they see
Advance and greet the Duke and court,
And take his seat with dignity.

"I am informed," the stranger said,
"Of the strange case we try to-day:
Antonio, do you own the bond?"
"I do," he said—the Jew cried "Ay."

"Then must the Jew be merciful,"
The sweet voice said, "Yes, he must show
Some pity to the ruined man,
As he God's mercy hopes to know."

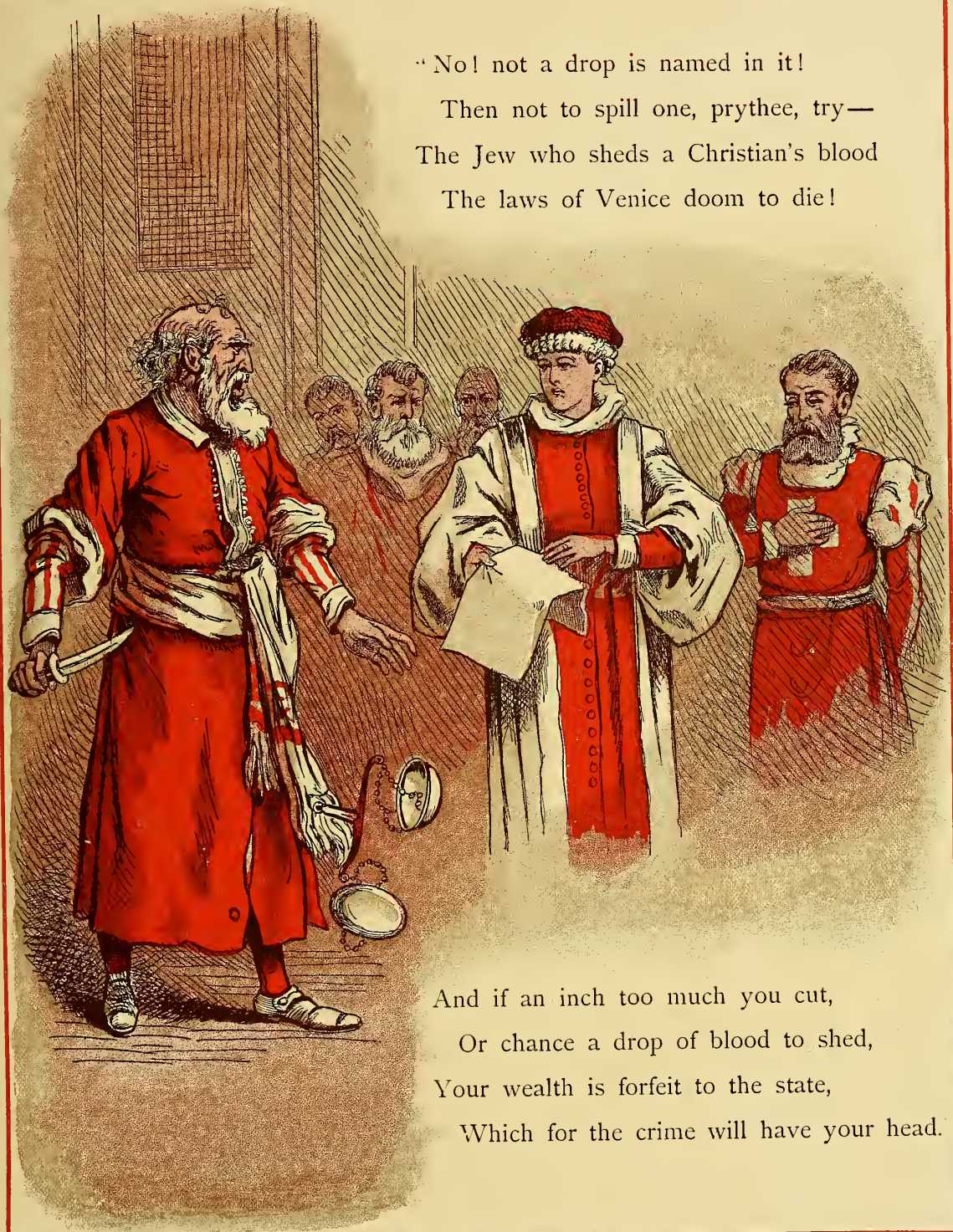
But stubbornly the Jew replied,
"My deed be on my head! I claim
The forfeiture of my true bond,
Or the weak laws of Venice blame."

Then spoke the judge, "Can he not pay
The money to this cruel Jew?"
"Yes," cried Bassanio, "Ten times more
Than the three thousand to him due!"

In vain he speaks; with his own life
Offers, in vain, his friend's to buy:
"My bond, and nothing but my bond!"
Is still the cruel Shylock's cry.

"And, Shylock, you shall have your bond,"
The judge asserts,—"The law is clear."
Shylock exclaims, "O wise young judge!
A Daniel come to judgment here!"

And sharpens on is sole his knife.
"Wait," the judge orders, "Till we see
If one drop of the debtor's blood
By this your bond will forfeit be."



"No! not a drop is named in it!
Then not to spill one, prythee, try—
The Jew who sheds a Christian's blood
The laws of Venice doom to die!

And if an inch too much you cut,
Or chance a drop of blood to shed,
Your wealth is forfeit to the state,
Which for the crime will have your head.

Abashed and foiled the Jew now stands;
"Pay me, and I will go," he cries,
"No! you shall only have your bond!"
The lawyer, sternly, then replies.

"For plotting this good merchant's death,
You have yourself incurred his fate—
Your life is forfeit—and your wealth
Goes to the treasury of the state."

So thus the wicked Jew was caught,
In the same net that he had laid
To kill the good Antonio—
And had himself to death betrayed.

But as a Christian must forgive,
And mercy to the wicked show,
Antonio for Shylock pleads,
And begs the Duke to let him go.

His prayer was heard; old Shylock's life
They spared, but took his wealth away,
And a poor, broken-hearted man,
He went with heavy
heart away.

Who do you think the lawyer was
Who thus had saved Antonio's life?
Portia herself, dress'd like a judge!
Bassanio's kind and clever wife!

Thus the good merchant was repaid
For all the love he bore his friend;
And better fortune from henceforth
Did on his latter days attend.

His argosies—I mean his ships—
Came back at last; they were not lost,
But only upon stormy seas
For a long time delayed and tossed.

A royal merchant once again,
He dwelt in Venice all his days,
And won from those who knew his worth,
Esteem, and reverence, and praise.

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